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SUBJECT: DECEMBER ELECTIONS SHOW MAS GAINING IN OPPOSITION DEPARTMENT

REF: LA PAZ 722

CLASSIFIED BY: John S. Creamer, Charge, State, EXEC; REASON: 1.4(B),
(D)

11. (C) Summary: The opposition remains strong in Beni, but the ruling Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) party made considerable inroads in the December elections. The increase reflected the MAS' substantial investment in its Beni campaign, its increased appeal to poorer voters, and a weak opposition effort. Local opposition candidates believe the Morales administration may use legal action to prevent them from running in April local elections, while local ranchers fear the GOB may use land reform against its political opponents. The MAS will aim to make further gains in April. End Summary.

Background on Beni Department

12. (SBU) Beni Department is in Bolivia's eastern lowlands, bordering Brazil, and forms part of the "Media Luna" of departments that has opposed the MAS and pushed for increased autonomy. The economy is based on cattle, lumber, some agriculture, and apparently increasing drug trafficking. In the December 6 election, Presidential candidate Manfred Reyes Villa gained slightly more than 53% of the vote, while President Morales polled almost 38% of the vote.

MAS Pressures Opposition Leaders

13. (C) Beni Prefect (Governor) Ernesto Suarez of the opposition "Podemos" party told us that, while he is considering running again for office in April, he believes the Morales administration may try and use legal proceedings against him and Trinidad mayor Moises Shriqui to prevent them from running. He believes the MAS intends to "destroy" the opposition, now that they "have it all" after their victory in the December 6 elections. Suarez is also concerned that, once he resigns his office to begin his campaign (as required by Bolivian law), the MAS will assign an interim prefect, lessening his chances of reelection.

14. (C) Suarez judges that, despite the MAS having put considerable effort into Beni prior to the last elections, they have only limited support. He says the people of the department tend to reject central government, strongly favor autonomy, and back traditional political parties such as the MNR. Still, they are

tiring of their opposition to the MAS and the La Paz government, and are less likely to protest than before. Bishop Julio Maria Elias also told us the MAS won't receive much support in the April elections in Beni, in part because local people see the MAS as a "transplant" from the highlands.

15. (C) Beni Senator Fernando Romero of the MNR party (and previously prefect of Beni) agreed that the MAS will not have a strong showing in the April elections. He expects the GOB, through the Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria (INRA) to "persecute" opposition politicians and large landowners in the department by expropriating their land. Romero was critical of the opposition's lack of cohesion, describing it as a "save yourself if you can" attitude. He sees German Antelo, recently elected as Senator from Santa Cruz, emerging as the leader of the opposition in the eastern departments.

Ranchers Concerned Over Land Title

16. (C) The politically influential rancher's organization "FEGABENI" echoed Romero's comments, telling us the MAS intends to wrest land from them in part due to their opposition politics. Due to this uncertainty, their members are now having difficulty obtaining lines of credit from banks, which fear that land used as collateral will be expropriated. Still, the ranchers agreed the MAS will be unable to win the prefecture in April's election.

MAS Campaign Tactics

17. (C) All interlocutors said the MAS had invested heavily in the department prior to the December 6 election. Suarez noted the GOB had diverted financial resources away from the prefect and opposition mayors, managing development projects directly from La Paz. Shriqui claimed the MAS spent five million dollars on its campaign in Beni, alleging that money from Venezuela went directly to pro-government municipalities. Gary Suarez, the publisher of the local newspaper, said the MAS provided jobs as unskilled laborers to 3000 people, paying slightly more than one hundred dollars a month in return for votes (with the vote being verified through images taken by cellphone cameras in the voting booths). Riberalta mayor Freddy Mejia claimed the MAS encouraged people to migrate from Potosi, Oruro and Cochabamba to Beni to broaden its support. Suarez said state-owned TV Channel 7 has a strong presence throughout the department, and broadcast a steady stream of pro-government spots.

Indigenous Leader Skeptical of MAS

18. (C) National indigenous leader Marcial Fabricano told us that much of the indigenous community in Beni went to MAS in the recent elections, in part out of sympathy for the Aymara/Quechua base of the MAS. Fabricano believes that President Morales, despite his campaign rhetoric, has not helped indigenous groups much. What actions he does take are to garner votes and gain the approval of the international community. Despite requests from the MAS, Fabricano said he refused offers of positions in the party (unsurprisingly, since he was whipped by alleged MAS militants earlier this year; Reftel). He noted the implementation of increased autonomy in Bolivia lacks structure at all levels - municipal, regional, and departmental.

Counter Narcotics a Growing Concern

19. (C) Suarez described an "enormous" increase in drug trafficking in Beni, most of it going across international borders in small planes. He attributed this to greater production in the Chapare region, coupled with the departure of the DEA from Bolivia. Suarez said "many local and international people, including gangs, are involved" in the drug trade and said transit points include the towns of San Ramon, San Joaquin, Santa Ana, Guayaramerin, and Magdalena. Local pilots are being paid 30,000 dollars to fly a load of cocaine across the border to Brazil, he said, and Shriqui claimed that as many as 70 small planes had recently arrived in Beni. Romero said a common pattern is for the pilots to leave the Trinidad airport, fly into a dirt strip on a ranch, load up with drugs and then fly on to Brazil. The mayor of the border town of Guayaramerin confirmed the area is a transit point for drugs, and

said the increased Bolivian military presence in neighboring Pando department is pushing traffickers to operate in northern Beni.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: While the opposition remains strong in the Beni, the MAS made considerable inroads in the December elections, including winning two senate seats. In the 2005 elections the MAS won only 16.5 % of the vote in Beni (about 17,000 votes), whereas in 2009 it received more than 37% of the vote (more than 60,000 votes). This increase was a result of the MAS putting considerable resources into their Beni campaign, a weak effort by opposition parties, and the MAS' messages gaining traction with poorer voters. We expect the MAS to continue its efforts in Beni in advance of the April elections.

Creamer